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Beyond mediation: How conflict coaching can enhance your practice

Nadja ALEXANDER

Singapore Management University, nadjaa@smu.edu.sg

S HARDY

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Beyond mediation: how conflict coaching might help your practice

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Nadja Alexander (Editor) (Singapore International Dispute Resolution Academy)

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In this posting I want to reflect on how, as a mediator, I've learnt much from the related but independent conflict management process, called conflict coaching. Before I get ahead of myself, however, let me start by offering an explanation of conflict coaching.

Conflict coaching is a service provided by a conflict specialist to a person who is, or may in the future be, involved in conflict. According to the REAL Conflict Coaching model, coaches assist clients to develop the 5 Cs:

CLARITY: Gain clarity about the conflict situation;

COMPREHENSION: Understand their own, and the other person's, needs and goals;

CHOICES: Identify and evaluate their choices for moving forward;

CONFIDENCE: Develop confidence about managing conflict and achieving their goals.

COMPETENCE: Develop conflict management skills so that they can constructively engage in the conflict.

Conflict coaching can be used as a preventative tool – to assist people to be able to constructively manage conflict that might arise in the future. It can also be used to assist people currently experiencing conflict to manage it better. Where formal conflict management mechanisms are being considered or used such as formal complaints, mediation, investigations, litigation, conflict coaching also has a role. It can be used to assist people to prepare for such mechanisms – for example by helping them to clearly define their complaint, to consider options and alternatives, and to support them in preparing to participate in another conflict management process; conflict coaching can also be used to follow up on mediation, investigations, litigation and other conflict management processes.

My journey to conflict coaching developed out of mediation work with multi-party disputes and also multiple session mediations.

In multi-party disputes, I tend to invest a lot of time in preliminary meetings with individual stakeholders or stakeholder groups – often there were multiple preliminary meeting with each stakeholder or party. Here time was spent developing rapport and trust with each party, getting a sense of the dynamics of the conflict from their perspective, and assisting them to identify and articulate what's most important for them and prepare for negotiations with the other parties. If you think about this for a moment, it fits pretty neatly with the 5Cs of the REAL conflict coaching model referred to above. Essentially I was using preliminary meetings to help parties:

- gain clarity about their situation,
- comprehend what was important for them in terms of their interests and needs,

- make choices about moving forward, and
- develop the confidence and
- competence

to engage in negotiations with the other parties to the conflict.

Now, I might not have been doing this in a particularly systematic way but my intention sits nicely with the overall objective of conflict coaching.

When I started out mediating, I practised a single session model -in other words you mediate until it's done, whether it takes 3 hours or 3 days. Then one day an organisational client requested one and a half hour mediation. I explained that I didn't think 90 minutes would be enough time to deal with the conflict and the numerous people involved in it. The conversation went back and forth, until I finally realised that the client (a professional partnership with eight partners) envisaged mediations occurring on a regular basis – every week or every fortnight. After some initial reluctance, I agreed. In hindsight, it was one of the best process decisions I've ever made. A whole new mediation paradigm opened up for me and slowly unpacked itself – a story for another blog. More than that though, and unbeknownst to me at the time, there were new opportunities for conflict coaching.

In between sessions numerous opportunities emerged to help one or the other partner develop the confidence and competence to engage in their conflict in a constructive way. For example, one partner really wanted to work on her skills in having difficult conversations. Another, for whom English was a second language, felt that he needed help in finding an effective, direct and business-like communication style that did not offend others. Yet another was not sure about whether or not she wanted to remain in the partnership and wanted to invest some time in a one-on-one discussion to gain clarity about her situation and the choices open to her in relation to leaving the partnership or staying. These were all opportunities to engage in conflict coaching (if appropriate) or to refer the partner to another conflict coach in between mediation sessions.

My journey from mediation to coaching also came from situations where one person would come to me about mediation and the other wasn't ready to come to the table. This occurred frequently in workplace contexts—for example, in large workplaces such as universities, large corporates and government departments – where individuals contemplating mediation were encouraged to speak with a mediator first in order to help them decide how they wanted to proceed. Sometimes one individual would want to proceed with mediation and the other person involved would not. So what could I offer the person seeking mediation? Intuitively I did what many of us would do: I listened, helped the person clarify their goals and very often ended up coaching them on how to engage the other in what would likely be a difficult conversation or negotiation about their conflict. Again, this draws on a conflict coaching skill set.

So the principles underlying conflict coaching are consistent with those of mediation and mediators draw upon conflict coaching skills to enhance their own repertoire of process interventions and skills. At the same time, conflict coaching is a separate and distinct process with its own a theory, system, strategies and skills. Mediation and conflict coaching feature:

- different process goals;
- the involvement of a different selection of stakeholders in the conflict; and
- to some extent, different skills.

Conflict coaching offers mediators a systematic approach to conducting in-depth preliminary and follow-up private sessions with individual parties as well as private sessions within mediation. It also offers mediators and others and opportunity to work one-on-one with clients independently of the mediation process and to coach them to more effectively engage in their own conflicts.